

Seven Habits of Highly Successful Websites

I got a phone call from my father the other day. "Oh," I thought immediately, "he's probably calling to finally apologize for failing to attend that basketball game I played at in fourth grade." But no, I was once again wrong. He was calling to pitch his web startup.

They're at the racquetball court, the grocery store, the venture capitalists' offices — you can't avoid this new crowd of so-called "Web 2.0" startups. And every time they meet you, if they're not asking for angel funding, they're asking for suggestions on how they should run their company.

For a long time, I'd simply tell them they should ask a real expert, like Dr. Paulson Graham of the Institute of Advances Startup Studies, but the number of queries has become so great that I've decided to conduct some research of my own.

I picked out seven recent extremely popular websites. While perhaps not having the mindshare of a "Basecamp" or a "Ning", these websites do have the benefit of having tons of actual users. Here they are, ranked roughly in order of popularity:

I looked at all these websites to see what they have in common. Here's what I discovered.

With the single exception of Flickr, all these websites are hideous. Facebook and Wikipedia redesigned late in the game, upgrading their web design from "hideous" to "barely tolerable", but MySpace has continued on, its name becoming synonymous with design so atrocious it has actually been known to induce vomiting in epileptic Japanese children. Not surprisingly, it's the most popular site on the list.

Unlike most of Google, Google Maps actually isn't such a bad looking website in itself, but most of its Web 2.0 "cred" comes from its ability to make "mashups" in which people stick a Google Map with several hundred thousand different little red blurbles icons sticking all over it onto a webpage whose design sense can best be described as "MySpace knockoff". Normally I don't go in for guilt by association, but in this case I think it's deserved.

Del.icio.us and Digg both attempted redesigns at one point but due to a tragic mixup in communication, the web design teams they hired misheard their instructions and thought their job was actually to try to make the site look worse instead of better. Having blown several thousand dollars of their VC's money on this enterprise, they had no choice but to launch the resulting look.

Let's start with MySpace. Again, just as it's a leader in traffic, it's a leader in this category. MySpace has so few features, I don't even know what it does. Neither, apparently, do its users, who in fact create MySpace accounts simply to impress their friends and annoy their teachers. (Personal communication)

The last time Wikipedia added a substantive new feature was the addition of categories a couple years ago and, frankly, that was a pretty bad idea because it was so poorly implemented. Otherwise it's basically just been a big box you edit text in with a bunch of kluges on top. That's how it got to be number two.

Facebook, Flickr, and Digg all add features occasionally, but they're more than counteracted by Del.icio.us and Google Maps, which in fact have actively taken features away. Del.icio.us decided that tag intersections (finding links that are tagged with two words) was just too hard to get back online after they were purchased by Yahoo! and so they simply took the feature down without notice. The site spiked in popularity until they added them back the other day and traffic went down once again.

Google Maps, meanwhile, has just removed everything else from the page except for the map and the search box, ensuring no features get in between the user and their mapping experience. Like most Google software, though, features are definitely not going to be added.

None of the content on any of these sites is provided by the people who made the site. In every case, the content is provided by the users. The only exception is Google Maps, where the content is provided NAVTEQ.

Combined with the last principle, you might begin to suspect that this is simply because the developers of these sites are extremely lazy. But I don't believe that; I think there's a more complicated principle at work.

I believe in a theory I'll call "The Stupidity of Crowds". Here's the basic idea: if just one person or a small group of people builds a website, they have to be at least moderately intelligent. Buying servers and writing programs is somewhat hard and takes a little bit of brainpower. This means that the content for their site will be similarly intelligent and thus it won't be of interest to the vast majority of Internet users.

The glorious thing about the Internet, however, is that it allows us to aggregate the combined stupidity of literally *millions* of people. No longer do you have to try to play towards the lowest common denominator — now you can actually have the lowest common denominator build your site for you. No single mortal could possibly come up with the content you find on the average MySpace, let alone the hideous color scheme, garish backgrounds, and awful auto-playing background music. No, something like that takes The Stupidity of Crowds.

Like 99.999999% of all websites on the Internet, none of these websites supports web standards, the documents that explain the proper way to use the Web. Enough said.

MySpace, Flickr, Del.icio.us, and Google Maps all sold out to larger companies. (Google Maps didn't even launch until after it was acquired.) Wikipedia is apparently some sort bizarre legal construction called a "donation-funded non-profit" and this apparently has made it hard to sell. (Note to future founders: make sure not to incorporate your company as one of these as it can severely hamper your options later on.)

Facebook and Digg haven't sold out yet, but I bet they want to. (Another tip: taking large quantities of VC money also makes it hard to sell your company, both because it gives you a swelled head but also because it gives the VCs control over when you can sell, and their heads are *really* big.)

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